Evaluating Current Arms-control Proposals: Perspectives from the US, Russia and China

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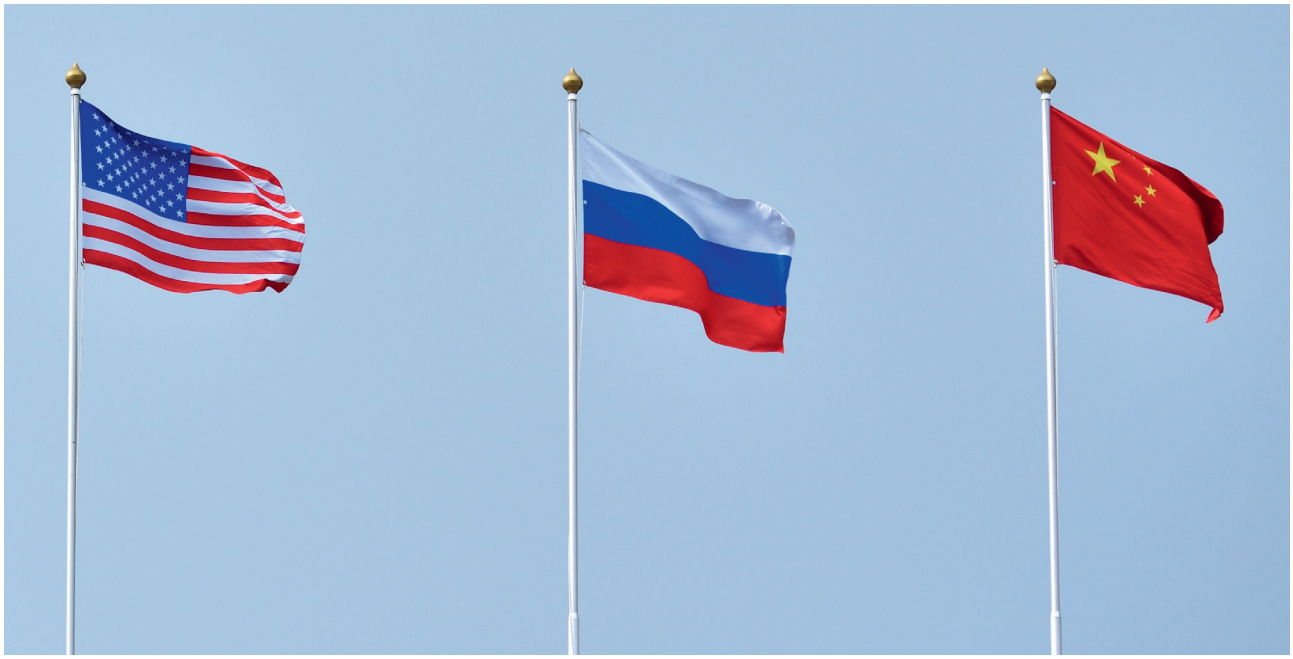

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The flags of the United Sates, Russia and China (Photo by Pridannikov via Getty Images)

Executive Summary

The last remaining strategic-arms-control treaty between Russia and the United States will expire in February 2026, with little prospect of a follow-on agreement. Russia's war in Ukraine has upended the European security order and the adversarial relationship between Moscow and NATO has dashed any chance of near-term engagement. China, meanwhile, has steadily expanded its nuclear- and conventional-missile arsenals, and has thus far only sporadically engaged in consultations with the US.

The US, Russia and China have over the last five years tabled proposals for arms-control and risk-reduction measures that each viewed as mitigating arms-racing, lowering the risk of nuclear use and contributing to upholding global non-proliferation norms. However, conflicting interests and adversarial relations have so far served to stymie any progress.

In this report, three experts – one American, one Russian and one Chinese – set out an examination of selected arms-control and risk-reduction proposals from their respective countries, and assess their potential contributions to strategic stability. They also provide short critiques of the proposals tabled by the other two countries, thereby highlighting both the differences and the commonalities between the positions currently held by Washington, Moscow and Beijing.

Each country's apparent position on pursuing new arms-control agreements is untenable or unacceptable in the eyes of one or both of the other two. The arms-control impasse between the US and Russia could in principle be alleviated by pursuing more informal approaches, but the near-term prospects for negotiations are poor, given the two countries' adversarial relationship, the diminished political will on both sides and the fact that both have increasingly come to perceive certain types of missile system as useful. China's proposed 'No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative', as currently conceived, is unlikely to be considered seriously in Russia or the US, for various political and technical reasons.

While the current arms-control landscape remains troubling, the maintenance of dialogue between experts such as the contributors to this report will be crucial for shaping initiatives that may become feasible in future, if the political climate improves.

Introduction

Bilateral and multilateral arms control for limiting theatre- and strategic-range missile systems is in a quandary. The optimism following Russia and the United States' signing of a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2021 has dissipated, and there now seems to be no prospect of a wider and more comprehensive treaty succeeding it. Although in late 2021 there was some interest on the part of NATO members and Russia in discussing restrictions on the deployment of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles, Russia's subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine has instead catalysed NATO members' renewed interest in acquiring more missiles, and new types, to improve deterrence capabilities. Meanwhile, in the Asia-Pacific, China continues to increase its numbers of conventional and nuclear-armed missile systems, while at the same time rebuffing overtures from the US to engage in strategic-stability discussions.

Despite tensions between the US on one hand and China and Russia on the other, each country is still making some attempts to table arms-control and risk-reduction proposals that they deem critical for strategic stability. The US wanted to negotiate a follow-on to New START with Russia, but is now preparing for the possibility that it will disappear without an analogous replacement. Russia continues to propose its moratorium on deploying ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles above a 500 kilometre-range threshold. And China has tabled a multilateral no-first-use treaty for the P5 nuclear-weapons states. However, none of these efforts has so far reached even the negotiating stage, as the other countries have cited various political, technical or military reasons why the proposals were unacceptable or unrealistic – or sometimes even failed to acknowledge them altogether, at least publicly.

This research report explores the reasons for the impasse, and attempts to identify any remaining common ground on which the three countries can build. Three authors – one American, one Russian and one Chinese – assess the value, potential scope and feasibility of selected proposals from their respective countries. They also provide brief critical responses to the proposals tabled by the other two authors' countries. In doing so, they worked separately rather than interactively, focusing just on the other countries' proposals rather than replying to one another's submissions.

The first section of this report addresses the US proposal for a follow-on treaty to New START. It also discusses the prospects for the continuation of elements of the treaty after it expires in 2026. This includes Russia and the US unilaterally or jointly committing to remaining within the central limits of New START and to retaining fixed data exchanges. Such progress, however, will depend on the security environments in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, as well as on the inclinations of the next US president.

The second section of the report assesses Russia's proposal for a moratorium on the deployment of missile systems formerly banned by the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. It also considers the outlook for concluding an agreement restraining such systems in light of Russia's development and deployment of the Novator 9M729 (RS-SSC-8 *Screwdriver*) ground-launched land-attack cruise missile (LACM) and the United States' plans to deploy corresponding systems in Europe and the Asia-Pacific.

Finally, the third section details China's 'No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative', which envisions the P5 countries concluding a treaty or issuing a political statement forswearing any first use of nuclear weapons against one another. The section outlines the value of China's proposal for risk reduction and for creating the environment for nuclear disarmament, and proposes steps to achieve progress in concluding such an agreement.

1. The Future of Bilateral Nuclear-arms Control: US Policy and Proposals

Amy F. Woolf, consultant specialising in nuclear-weapons and arms-control policy

The views expressed here are those of the author. They are not meant to convey or advocate for the official positions of the United States government.

In 2021, during the first year of the administration of President Joe Biden, the United States and Russia seemed poised to expand their cooperation on bilateral nuclear-arms control. In January, Biden and President Vladimir Putin agreed to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) through February 2026. In June 2021, they also established a Strategic Stability Dialogue where they hoped to hold discussions on a treaty to follow New START.[1]

The US and Russia held two meetings of this Dialogue in 2021 and one in January 2022, but they have not met since then.[2] They have also stopped implementing parts of New START. Russia has suspended its implementation of the data exchange, notification and inspection provisions after the US found it in violation of its obligations to resume on-site inspections and consultative meetings.[3] Moreover, the US and Russia support distinctly different goals for a follow-on treaty and would probably lack the time to resolve these differences before New START expires in 2026. Regardless, Russia has refused to return to the negotiating table while the US provides support to Ukraine and, in Moscow's view, wages 'hybrid war' against Russia.[4]

This raises questions about possible alternative paths for bilateral arms control in the absence of a formal treaty. For example, the US and Russia could each announce, either unilaterally or in a joint statement, that they would remain within the limits of New START and would continue sharing data on their forces for a time after it expires. Or they could shift their focus to discussions on risk-reduction and confidence-building measures. These options, however, require a political and security environment conducive to arms-control discussions and the political will to reach agreements. Neither of these is currently in evidence.

US and Russian Goals for Nuclear-arms Control

The limits in New START apply to US and Russian long-range land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), long-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers. The US has proposed that a follow-on treaty not only count these weapons but also limit new types of nuclear-delivery systems that would not count under New START. It would also like the next treaty to address all existing strategic, non-strategic and non-deployed weapons.[5]

The US concern with new types of Russian delivery systems focuses on several that have been tested or deployed since New START entered into force in 2011.[6] Two of these – the *Avangard* hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) deployed on existing RS-18 (RS-SS-19 *Stiletto* mod 4) ICBMs, and the multiple-warhead RS-28 *Sarmat* (RS-SS-X-29) ICBM – count as ICBMs under the definitions in New START.

Table 1.1: **Russia and the US: aggregate numbers of strategic offensive arms (according to biannual data exchanges under New START), September 2022 and March 2023**

	1 September 2022		1 March 2023	
	Russia	US	Russia	US
Deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers	540	659	Not provided	662
Warheads on deployed ICBMs and on deployed SLBMs, and nuclear warheads counted for deployed heavy bombers	1,549	1,420	Not provided	1,419
Deployed and non-deployed launchers of ICBMs, deployed and non-deployed launchers of SLBMs, and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers	759	800	Not provided	800

Sources: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation; United States Department of State

Others – including the *Poseidon* uninhabited underwater vehicle (UUV) and the *Burevestnik* (RS-SSC-X-09 *Skyfall*) nuclear-powered cruise missile – do not travel along a ballistic trajectory, as defined by the treaty, and therefore would not count under its limits.

The US proposal also highlights that New START limits neither shorter-range nuclear-capable delivery systems nor warheads held in storage. To address these weapons, a new treaty could count all deployed and non-deployed warheads under an aggregate limit. In this case, the treaty would have to contain precise definitions of the weapons to be limited, establish procedures that might be used to count them, and outline monitoring mechanisms to verify compliance with the limits. As a less intrusive alternative, the parties could begin with an informal agreement, based on either unilateral statements or a joint statement, to share data on the location of their storage areas and the numbers of warheads held in each facility, without any formal definitions or monitoring mechanisms.

In contrast to the US focus on nuclear-capable delivery vehicles and nuclear warheads, Russia would like to 'develop a new security equation that would cover all factors affecting strategic stability' and would 'embrace the entire spectrum of both nuclear and non-nuclear, offensive and defensive arms with strategic capability'.[7] This would include limits on US ballistic-missile-defence programmes, limits on non-nuclear strategic-range delivery systems, and limits on British and French nuclear forces.[8] Russia has also rejected limits on non-strategic nuclear warheads, indicating it would only consider them if the US withdrew its own nuclear warheads and dismantled its nuclear infrastructure in Europe.[9]

In June 2023, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said the Biden administration was willing to engage in bilateral arms-control discussions with Russia and with China without preconditions

(Photo by Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

In June 2023, President Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, said that the US was ready to engage with Russia 'to manage nuclear risks and develop a post-2026 arms control framework'.[10] The US presented Russia with new proposals in September 2023,[11] but Russia again refused to resume arms-control talks while the US was 'seeking the strategic defeat of Russia through its support of Ukraine'.[12]

Options for Arms Control After New START

If New START expires without a replacement, the US and Russia could pledge, either unilaterally or in a joint statement, to maintain their forces at New START levels. They could also agree to exchange basic data on the numbers and locations of deployed systems. This might offer some transparency into their force postures and provide them with more time to negotiate a follow-on treaty. But it would not restrain either side's modernisation programmes, nor introduce limits on the other items that both have placed on the agenda for a future treaty. This approach also assumes that both sides believe their national-security interests are served by limits on, and transparency into, their nuclear forces. Moreover, the pledges would likely lapse if the security environment were to continue to erode and either side sought additional forces to meet its national-security requirements.

The US and Russia might also seek to strengthen existing communications channels and confidence-building measures, while identifying new risk-reduction measures. These tools have long been part of US–Soviet and US–Russian efforts to manage their nuclear competition. They can provide reliable channels of communication during a crisis; help ensure clarity of communication to avoid decision-making based on misunderstandings; and create agreements on how states will address situations that could lead to nuclear use.[13] Examples include the communications 'hotline' established in 1963, the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement, and the missile-launch notification requirements adopted since 1988.

The US has also advocated for risk-reduction measures in international forums. For example, in early 2024, after the US determined that Russia was preparing to launch a nuclear-armed anti-satellite weapon, it argued both in public statements and at the United Nations Security Council that an orbiting nuclear-armed system would be destabilising and catastrophic for all countries, as all countries are becoming increasingly reliant on space.[14] It has, therefore, sought a UN Security Council resolution to reinforce the 1967 Outer Space Treaty's ban on placing weapons of mass destruction on orbit.

While Russia has stated that it will continue to provide missile test-flight notifications under the 1988 launch-notification agreement, it has rejected US proposals to hold a bilateral dialogue on risk reduction and objected to the US draft resolution reinforcing the Outer Space Treaty.

Risk-reduction measures cannot replace legally binding treaties in restraining the numbers and capabilities of deployed nuclear weapons, but they can still help states identify dangerous activities and mitigate the risks created by those activities. Moreover, these discussions have value even if the participants do not adopt specific measures. The two sides can explain their concerns even if they disagree about the cause or severity of the problem. The talks also provide an alternative pathway for the US and Russia to maintain communications during challenging times. But, as noted above, both sides must believe that it is in their national-security interests to cooperate in reducing the risk of nuclear war.

The Evolving US Position

According to senior US government officials, the US will 'remain committed to arms control and risk reduction measures with our nuclear-armed competitors, should circumstances permit and responsible partners emerge'.[15] But it has recently outlined a new arms-control strategy that reflects US security requirements in an international security environment where Russia and China continue to modernise and expand their nuclear arsenals while rejecting US proposals for dialogues.

Under this strategy, the US will 'continue to abide by New START limits for the duration of the Treaty, so long as Russia does the same'.[16] But it will also prepare for 'a world where constraints on nuclear weapons arsenals disappear entirely'.[17]

The US plans to develop a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile for deployment by 2034

(Photo by Bettmann/Contributor Getty Images)

The US will focus, firstly, on modernising its ageing nuclear-delivery systems and warheads, updating its nuclear command, control, and communication systems, and investing in its nuclear-production facilities. It also plans to develop a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) to bolster deterrence in the Indo-Pacific as China expands the numbers of delivery systems and warheads in its nuclear force posture.[18] US officials contend that this approach will help rejuvenate strategic arms control because it will create an incentive for Russia and China to engage with the US and will 'provide the US with leverage in those engagements'.[19] Moreover, the programmes will support US security requirements in an environment that lacks limits on the numbers of deployed nuclear weapons.

Prospects for Future Progress

As long as the US continues to face challenging security environments in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific, an administration led by Kamala Harris, currently vice president, would probably adhere to policies similar to those of the Biden administration, with a continued emphasis on the modernisation and potential expansion

of the US nuclear arsenal.[20] At the same time, a Harris administration could seek to expand US engagement with the international community on risk-reduction and confidence-building measures. It might also continue to seek pathways towards a dialogue with Russia on risk-reduction and crisis-management measures and, possibly, on a follow-on treaty to New START.

While the Biden administration has stated that it would resume negotiations with Russia without preconditions, a Harris administration may find it necessary to link its arms-control agenda to an end to the war in Ukraine. The US almost certainly would not accept Russia's condition that the US end its financial and military support for Ukraine before the talks resume. Moreover, although a Harris administration could theoretically offer to restrain the US nuclear-modernisation programme or limit US weapons deployments as incentives for Russia to engage in negotiations, it would face significant domestic political opposition to this approach if Russia and China continued to advance their own nuclear programmes.

If Donald Trump becomes president again, his administration would probably base its policy on the same assessment of expanding nuclear programmes in Russia and China, and would likely continue to prioritise the modernisation of US nuclear weapons. Moreover, given its probable reliance on analysts and experts from more conservative defence organisations and think tanks, it would likely support proposals not only to expand the numbers and capabilities of US nuclear weapons but, as former national security advisor Robert O'Brien has suggested, 'to maintain technical and numerical superiority to the combined Chinese and Russian nuclear stockpiles'.[21] In his first term in office, president Trump withdrew the US from several arms-control agreements. It seems likely, therefore, that a second Trump administration would heed calls from policy advocates and members of Congress for the US to withdraw from New START.[22] As president, Trump would probably also appoint advisers at the Pentagon and State Department who have long opposed arms control and reject negotiated restraints on US nuclear capabilities, and who therefore might advise him to reject opportunities to engage with Russia on arms control even if the security environment changed.

A Harris administration would probably agree with the Biden administration's view that dialogues on arms control and risk reduction can bolster strategic stability and reduce nuclear risks. However, there are few prospects for progress in the current political and security environment. If a future US government is more willing to raise the stakes in the nuclear competition, the absence of dialogue now may eventually create far greater risks of instability in the international nuclear order in the future.

Russian Author's Perspective on the United States' Proposal

Dr Nikolai Sokov, Senior Fellow at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

In principle, the US proposal to informally continue elements of New START should not elicit resistance from Russia, although simple straightforward agreement does not seem likely.

The current mutual suspension of the agreement is an obvious hurdle to continuing its elements. Russia formally suspended New START in February 2023, and although Washington did not formally respond in kind, it has de facto mirrored Russia's suspension to ensure symmetry between the two parties.[23] However, the 1988 Ballistic Missile Launch Notification Agreement has remained in force.[24]

There is also the precedent of the US and the Soviet Union agreeing in 1981 to informally abide by the SALT II Treaty, which had not been ratified by Washington.[25]

New START does not interfere with Russia's almost-completed modernisation plans for its nuclear forces, which were organised with New START limits in mind. At the same time, some of the additional nuclear programmes Russia has unveiled during the last decade, such as the *Poseidon* UUV and the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered cruise missile, are not subject to New START. Both programmes were pursued before Russia's suspension and have continued unabated. Therefore, continued adherence to New START minus verification should be acceptable to Moscow. The only potential stumbling block may be political, as Russia may not immediately agree to a US initiative and may instead request consultations.

The only element of the US proposal which could jeopardise New START's suspended status is the envisaged exchange of data: pursuant to provisions of New START, data about treaty-limited items is exchanged twice a year. As defined by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 'suspension' presumes no action to implement the treaty, but an exchange of data would constitute such action here. Since Russia had abided by the exchange-of-data rules before, resumption of such exchanges should not elicit serious opposition. Whether the military agrees to reverting to greater openness by resuming data exchanges remains to be seen – politics and perceptions may play a greater role than substantive interests.

While there are political obstacles that may prevent Russia from continuing to implement some elements of New START beyond the treaty's expiry in 2026, the US may find adhering to New START limits even more difficult. Firstly, much will depend on Congress, which might initiate programmes inconsistent with the treaty. Secondly, and more challenging, China's widely reported expansion of its nuclear forces may lead Washington to exceed New START limits after 2026 in an attempt to balance two nuclear peers simultaneously. Current US plans do not foresee that, but the risk exists and has been articulated by the Biden administration.[26] In this sense the future of New START is somewhat unpredictable.

A further risk to an informal agreement is that, in the absence of on-site inspection activities, there will be no verification mechanisms available to Russia and the US to resolve possible accusations of breaching the treaty's limits. In the end, the future of the agreement or an informal understanding will ultimately depend on the goodwill of the two parties and the state of relations in early 2026.

Chinese Author's Perspective on the United States' Proposal

Dai Huaicheng, Secretary-General, China Arms Control and Disarmament Association

New START is important for maintaining global strategic stability, promoting international and regional peace, and realising the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world. The Final Document of the 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) emphasised the need for 'steps by all the nuclear-weapon States leading to nuclear disarmament in a way that promotes international stability, and based on the principle of undiminished security for all'.[27] The Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the NPT further emphasised that nuclear disarmament should be pursued 'in a way that promotes international stability, peace and security, and based on the principle of undiminished and increased security for all' and called on 'those States with the largest nuclear arsenals to lead efforts in this regards'.[28] As the two countries with the largest nuclear arsenals, Russia and the US should fulfil their special and primary responsibilities in nuclear disarmament by continuing to make drastic and substantive reductions in their nuclear arsenals in a verifiable, irreversible and legally binding manner, so as to further advance conditions for other nuclear-weapons states to join the nuclear-disarmament process and, ultimately, for comprehensive and complete nuclear disarmament. Therefore, the international community should encourage the US and Russia to settle their disputes through dialogue, promote the continuous implementation of New START, and try to negotiate a successor arrangement before its expiry in February 2026.

2. Assessing the Prospects for Russia's INF 2.0 Proposal

Dr Nikolai Sokov, Senior Fellow at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

Two years after the collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, Russia appeared to be still interested in reviving the agreement. The contours of Russia's proposal were vague, but some kind of arrangement seemed desirable and feasible to both Russia and the United States, and in contrast to most other issues on the arms-control agenda, Moscow seemed to support a return to some sort of limits over systems covered by the INF Treaty.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022 has brought a halt to arms-control talks with the US. The US plans to deploy conventional INF missiles in Germany from 2026, and Russia has announced that it would restart production of INF missiles in response (although it has not yet said anything about deployment). Together, these developments appear to have made any prospect of an INF Treaty 2.0 moribund. Does Europe now face a twenty-first-century Euromissile crisis, echoing that of the 1980s? And if so, could it still be avoided?

Background: the INF Treaty

The INF Treaty was concluded during an unprecedented period of breakthroughs on arms-control and confidence-building measures. The INF was the first of three regimes that shaped the nuclear-weapons landscape, the others being the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) and the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI) of 1991–92. The INF Treaty addressed Soviet and US ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometres, whereas the START treaties focused on Soviet and US strategic weapons. The PNI were an informal regime created by parallel unilateral statements by then-presidents George H.W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev about deep reductions of non-strategic nuclear weapons.

The INF Treaty provided for extensive verification measures, including exchange of data, on-site inspections, and the permanent presence of inspectors at selected Russian and US missile-production facilities. It had an unlimited duration; for the first ten years after the completion of missile elimination in 1991, the signatories continued on-site inspections, but thereafter active verification activities ceased.

The INF Treaty was never popular in Russia, and criticism of it began to intensify during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN) had been quietly lobbying in favour of intermediate-range (or theatre-range) missiles since the late 1990s.[29] With the appointment of Sergei Ivanov as defence minister in March 2001, opposition to the INF Treaty gained high-level support. The principal Russian objections to the treaty were: that it continued to be a bilateral agreement, which was a problem from Moscow's perspective because INF-class systems had proliferated elsewhere and Russia was within range of many of them;[30] that it did not limit sea- and air-launched missiles, two categories in which Russia was lagging behind the US; and that it banned ground-launched missiles irrespective of warhead (under the

Russia suspended its participation in the INF Treaty on 2 February 2019, following the United States' announcement of its intention to withdraw

(Photo by Alexey Nikolsky/Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images)

assumption, accepted during the Cold War, that those missiles would be fitted with nuclear warheads), which limited Russia's ability to deploy conventionally armed theatre-range missiles.[31]

In the early 2000s, Russia formally announced the goal of developing a long-range conventional capability. Ivanov said in 2003 that since the US and NATO had used long-range assets in earlier conflicts, Russia also needed the ability to strike deep into an adversary's territory.[32] In Ivanov's view the INF Treaty stood in the way, and he raised the possibility of withdrawing from the treaty in at least two meetings with his American counterparts in 2005 and 2007, citing US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 and the need to deter countries on Russia's periphery. The US side appeared receptive to the idea.[33]

Sources in Moscow indicated that a meeting of Russia's Security Council (a body broadly similar to the National Security Council in the US) in the autumn of 2007 considered withdrawal from the INF Treaty.[34] Although politically this would have been almost cost-free for Russia with the George W. Bush administration, Moscow ultimately rejected the idea, apparently because INF Treaty-compliant systems, such as the Raduga Kh-101 (RS-AS-23A *Kodiak*) air-launched cruise missile and Novator 3M14 *Kalibr* (RS-SS-N-30A *Sagaris*) naval cruise missile, were at the time in an advanced stage of development and would support theatre-level missions. It seems Moscow was reluctant to break an important arms-control treaty without pressing need, especially as it had only recently condemned US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. The other reason was probably interservice rivalry – Russia's air force and navy were reluctant to lose missions and funding to the RVSN.

Considering Russian objections to the INF Treaty, it is hardly surprising that there were suspicions among NATO countries that Russia's ostensibly treaty-compliant missiles in fact had longer ranges.[35] The ballistic version of the 9K720 *Iskander*-M (RS-SS-26 *Stone*) was suspected of having a range of 700 km with a 'simplified' ballistic trajectory.[36] The range of the first of the Novator 9M728 (RS-SSC-7 *Southpaw*) ground-launched cruise missiles was previously assumed by some analysts to be greater than 500 km.[37] These suspicions did not undermine the stability of the INF Treaty for a long time, however.

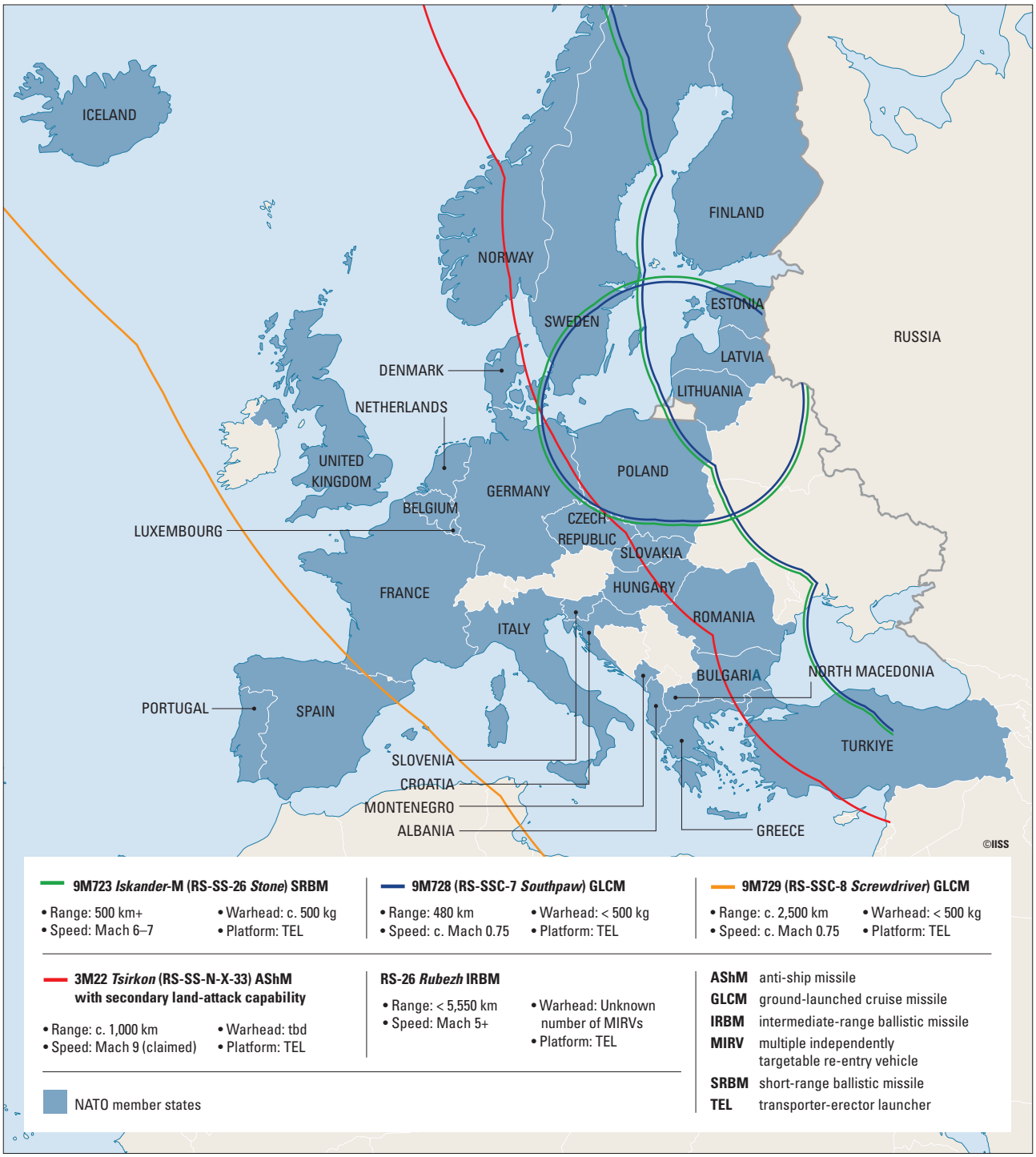
Russia displayed the alleged canister for the 9M729 (RS-SSC-8 *Screwdriver*) on 23 January 2019

(Photo by Vasily Maximov/AFP via Getty Images)

The US determined that Russia had started testing a ground-launched cruise missile that violated the INF Treaty in the late 2000s.[38] The White House informed Congress in 2011 and confidentially contacted Russia in 2013. Russia denied the allegation and said there was nothing to discuss until Washington provided evidence such as precise locations and dates of tests, along with specific information about the missile that the US was not prepared to disclose at that time. The issue became public after US–Russia relations dramatically worsened in 2014, further reducing the chances of successful resolution.

In late 2017 the US finally disclosed additional information, including the identification of the missile in question: the Novator 9M729 (RS-SSC-8 *Screwdriver*), a further version of the cruise missile for the 9K720 *Iskander* complex. Russia suggested ways it could demonstrate that the 9M729 did not violate the INF Treaty, but the US, with the support of allies, deemed the suggestions inadequate and stated that proof of violation was conclusive. Russia's violation alone was sufficient basis for a potential US withdrawal, but a further reason, at least for then-president Donald Trump's administration, was the need to strengthen deterrence against China. This concern was hardly surprising, given that China had begun to deploy INF-range missiles on a significant scale earlier in the 2010s. Washington formally withdrew from the INF Treaty on 2 August 2019.

Map 2.1: **Maximum range of selected Russian in-service and possible under-development ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles**



Source: IISS, *The Military Balance 2023*

Background: Freeze on INF Deployment

Considering the circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that Russia tried to preserve the INF Treaty in the form of an informal or perhaps even formal freeze on the deployment of theatre-range missiles. President Vladimir Putin first floated the proposal when addressing the Federal Assembly in February 2019, saying that while Russia was suspending the implementation of the INF Treaty in response to its suspension by the US, Russia would not deploy such missiles in Europe or elsewhere unless the US did.[39]

In September 2019, Putin sent letters to approximately 50 countries and organisations – including all NATO members, the European Union and China

– stating that Russia would not deploy INF-range missiles in Europe or elsewhere if the US reciprocated.[40] He also said that Russia was prepared to discuss the 'technical aspects' of verification of the freeze.[41] NATO also rejected this proposal, with then-secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg saying that Russia should start by eliminating the already-deployed ground-launched INF-range missiles.[42] US sources claimed in early 2019 that Russia had already deployed up to four brigades equipped with the 9M729 on its territory.[43]

In October 2020, Putin modified his offer, promising that Russia would not deploy ground-launched INF-range missiles as long as the United States' missiles in the same category did not 'appear in relevant regions', clearly implying that deployment decisions for Russian territories in Europe and Asia would be made separately.[44] This conveniently ignored Chinese theatre-range systems, which had already been deployed on a large scale. Putin also offered to discuss verification provisions.

NATO's response remained the same as before, and in its communiqué at the Brussels Summit in June 2021 it stated that:

> Russia's proposal for a moratorium on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe is inconsistent with Russia's unilateral and ongoing deployment of such systems on the continent and would not prevent Russia from building up such missiles outside of its European territory; this proposal is therefore not credible and not acceptable.[45]

INF 2.0 Back on the Agenda

INF 2.0 returned to the agenda between December 2021 and February 2022. This began with a package of Russian proposals – perhaps more resembling an ultimatum – on Euro-Atlantic security, sent in parallel to the US, NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.[46] These included the non-enlargement of NATO, arms control, and confidence-building. On ground-launched INF-range missiles, Russia proposed a mutual ban on deployment in areas where they could strike the other side's territory (i.e., including possible US deployment in Japan or South Korea). Moscow also proposed negotiating a verification framework, including mutual on-site inspections, remote monitoring, data exchanges and other measures intended to ensure compliance with the ban. It also reiterated that until a formal, legally binding agreement was concluded, an informal moratorium covering Russia and NATO should be enacted.

Washington did not accept all of Moscow's proposals but its response expressed openness to negotiating a replacement to the INF Treaty, provided that Russia demonstrated a commitment to transparency and verifiability.[47] The US was also open to a reciprocal moratorium on deployment of INF-range missiles in Europe as a preliminary step before a more comprehensive agreement could be negotiated.

The two parties held a meeting on 10 January 2022 to discuss areas of possible agreement, including an INF Treaty 2.0. Then-deputy secretary of state Wendy Sherman said at a post-meeting briefing that Washington was 'open to discussing the future of certain missile systems in Europe – along the lines of the now defunct INF Treaty between the US and Russia'.[48] She also said the parties 'put ideas on the table' on how to address the issues that caused the demise of the treaty – an important precondition for substantive negotiations. The US confirmed this position in the official response to Russian proposals, which was subsequently leaked to the media.[49]

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said the meeting was professional and substantive, but linked any agreement on restricting missile deployments to the non-enlargement of NATO – a demand unacceptable to the US.[50] This condition was subsequently confirmed by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.[51] In an interview at the end of January 2022, following the formal US response to the Russian proposals, Lavrov said the US position allowed for serious dialogue but only on 'secondary' issues, whereas disagreement on NATO enlargement persisted.[52]

Arms Race and the Prospects for a Freeze, 2024

Although Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 stopped any talks, Moscow's moratorium proposal remained on the table, at least in theory. Developments in 2024, however, have poured cold water on what notionally remained in play.

Map 2.2: **Range of planned US missile deployments to Germany***

In May 2024, in response to the United States' development of INF-range systems, Russia stated that it would 'accelerate completion of the work on developing' new intermediate-range missiles.[53] In June, Putin declared that Russia needed to begin production of ground-launched INF-range missiles.[54] The immediate pretext for that statement was the US inclusion of INF-range missiles in military exercises in the Philippines and Denmark.[55] While the deployments were ostensibly only for those exercises, Moscow viewed the moves as precursors to a permanent presence.[56]

What Russia had anticipated was confirmed through the US and Germany's joint statement in July 2024 of plans for the 'episodic' deployment of the SM-6 multi-purpose missile, *Tomahawk* ground-launched cruise missiles and the *Dark Eagle* hypersonic glide vehicle HGV, beginning in 2026.[57] In response, Putin threatened to end the moratorium and begin deployment of Russian INF-range missiles, the development of which was in the 'final stage' and included hypersonic missiles on surface and underwater platforms – most likely a reference to the 3M22 *Zircon* (RS-SSN-X-33) hypersonic missile.[58]

Ryabkov later added that Russia did not rule out deployment of INF-range systems with nuclear warheads.[59]

This new missile crisis was predictable. It was unrealistic on the part of Moscow not to expect the US to develop INF-range missiles and consider their deployment to the Asia-Pacific, given the disparity between Beijing and Washington on this class of weapon. US deployments of longer-range missiles in Asia would almost certainly have triggered a Russian response anyway. The deployment of US missiles to Europe did not appear to be quite so inevitable, however, especially after Trump – whose administration wanted to acquire this capability – lost the US presidential election in 2020. The interest of President Joe Biden's administration in a second INF Treaty towards the end of 2021 suggested Washington saw value in avoiding an arms race in Europe.

It is difficult to understand why Russia continued to adhere to its proposal about the moratorium and pushed a new INF Treaty. It is even more puzzling why it did not take the idea off the table after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Reputational considerations were perhaps a partial explanation. In the West there was little doubt that the 9M729 had been a violation of the treaty, but in the Global South this issue had much less traction and Moscow may have hoped that eventually its insistence on a moratorium and a new treaty could repair its reputation. This position also benefited China, which since 2014 has become an increasingly important partner for Moscow. As long as there remained hope of preventing or delaying deployment of US INF-range missiles to Asia, China stood to benefit. It is not known whether Russia used the 9M729 (or, for that matter, any INF-range ground-launched missiles) against Ukraine, further weakening the US and NATO case about the violation of the INF Treaty.[60]

The war against Ukraine demonstrated that air- and sea-launched cruise missiles, on which Russia had pinned so many hopes, were not effective. According to data released by Ukraine's commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrskyi, the interception rate for air- and sea-launched systems between February 2022 and August 2024 was 67%, whereas it was only 4.5% for ground-launched *Iskander* and *Tochka* short-range ballistic missiles, and 0.63% for S-300 and -400 interceptors used in a secondary ground-attack mode.[61] According to Russian experts, the greater vulnerability of air- and sea-launched missiles to missile defences was because Ukraine was able to detect strategic bombers and ships leaving bases, prompting Ukraine to alert its air and missile defences. In contrast, ground-launched systems were more difficult for Ukrainian and Western sensors to detect.[62] There is every reason to expect that Moscow will prefer to rely on ground-launched missiles for theatre-wide missions in the future, and that the lesson learned in the war with Ukraine will spur it to start production and later deployment of such assets.

If that indeed proves to be the case, it remains unclear what missiles Russia will eventually deploy. A new ground-launched cruise missile is an obvious option but Moscow could instead favour longer-range ballistic missiles (a derivative of the 9M723 *Iskander*-M), a ground-launched variant of the 3M22 *Zircon* hypersonic missile, or perhaps a modification of the RS-26 *Rubezh*, which was tested as a strategic missile. The latter is almost ready for deployment: it underwent successful testing in the 2010s, before the programme was frozen in 2018. The *Rubezh* was tested once at a range exceeding 5,500 km and was thus formally classified as a strategic missile, therefore not violating the INF Treaty.[63] It was widely believed, however, that its main mission was theatre rather than strategic; the missile may need to be modified to avoid it counting towards the New START limit. As well as holding European targets at risk, the *Rubezh* could also target US and NATO assets in the Asia-Pacific, as well as potentially the western seaboard of the contiguous US.

The most likely outcome is that Russia will develop or deploy several missile types. The emphasis will likely be on speed and manoeuvrability to penetrate NATO missile defences. Despite these possible plans, Russia continues to stick to its proposal about a moratorium and a renewed INF Treaty. As such, its deployment of INF-range missiles should depend on whether the US goes ahead with its deployment plans first. Were the US to deploy then Moscow might be forced to respond in kind.

Russia's proposals to rekindle the INF Treaty have provided a credible basis for discussion. The issue of Russia's violation remains a serious impediment, but

it is possible that this could be resolved without a public admission from Moscow. While today's crisis has some echoes of the early 1980s and of the negotiations that led to the signing of the INF Treaty in 1987, there are also key differences. Moscow today is less likely to make concessions than its Soviet predecessor. The INF Treaty is still viewed as having placed the Soviet Union at a considerable disadvantage, and Russia's relations with the US and its European allies have reached a post-Cold War nadir.

In the US and Europe there also appears to be little enthusiasm to engage with Russia, and any new agreement is likely to be predicated on the insistence that Moscow admit to having violated the INF Treaty.

A further complication is China. The US will not ignore China's INF-class weapons and would likely insist they become part of any future negotiations. Any proposal on trilateral negotiations would in turn probably trigger a Russian demand for five-party negotiations, with the inclusion of France and the United Kingdom. Further complicating any potential talks is the fact that European countries have embarked on a new initiative known as the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA), developing ground-launched missiles which will be of INF ranges.[64] Successfully negotiating a new multilateral framework would therefore be a serious challenge.

A second INF Treaty remains possible; the Russian proposals, regardless of their original motivation, provide a foundation for negotiations. Any agreement, however, will almost certainly be more difficult to reach than the 1987 treaty. NATO seems firmly set on deployment of theatre-range conventional missiles that it believes are vital for strengthening its deterrence posture. Moscow, for its part, is equally determined to respond in kind (and the Russian military is apparently strongly in favour of such a deployment, perhaps even regardless of what NATO does – justifications are required by politicians, not by the military). Furthermore, Moscow has made it clear that it will not enter arms-control negotiations with the US while the war in Ukraine continues. The likely stubbornness of the parties brings to mind the initial phase of the Euromissile crisis in the early 1980s. There are two big differences, however. Firstly, opposition in Germany to US missile deployments is mostly concentrated on the far left and right, and among a minority of the governing Social Democratic Party, rather than spanning the political spectrum.[65] Secondly, the path to the INF Treaty was paved by multiple concessions made by Gorbachev. Such concessions today do not appear likely. Politics can change, of course, but today there seems to be little prospect of an agreement.

US Author's Perspective on Russia's Proposal

Amy F. Woolf, consultant specialising in nuclear-weapons and arms-control policy

After the US announced its plans to withdraw from the 1987 INF Treaty in February 2019, President Putin stated that Russia would 'deploy intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons … neither in Europe nor anywhere else until US weapons of this kind are deployed to the corresponding regions of the world'.[66] In subsequent comments, Putin indicated that Russia would not deploy the missile at the centre of the INF dispute, the 9M729 (RS-SCC-8 *Screwdriver*) ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) in Kaliningrad even though Russia had denied that the missile could fly to INF-range. He also indicated that Russia would include 'verification measures' to 'confirm the absence of ground-based intermediate- and shorter-range missiles at the sites covered by the agreements'.[67]

The US did not engage in discussions on this proposal in 2019, and almost certainly would not pursue it now, following Russia's use of cruise missiles and ballistic missiles against Ukraine. To the contrary, the US and Germany issued a Joint Statement in July 2024 announcing plans to begin episodic deployments of US conventionally armed INF-range missiles to Germany in 2026.[68]

From the US perspective, Russia's proposed moratorium was neither a credible demonstration of Russian restraint nor a feasible opening for arms-control cooperation. The US withdrew from the INF Treaty because it believed Russia had violated the treaty with its development of the 9M729 GLCM. Although Russia had not tested this missile to more than 500 km from a deployed land-based launcher, the US concluded that

data collected during flight tests conducted over several years demonstrated that the missile had the *capability* to fly to INF ranges, which is the standard for compliance identified in the treaty.[69]

In early 2019, Russia displayed what it claimed to be a canister for a 9M729 missile, but it neither displayed the missile itself nor provided its technical characteristics and capabilities.[70] Moreover, it never conducted a monitored flight test to demonstrate that the missile, if tested to its full range, could not fly to a range greater than 500 km. And it had already begun to deploy this missile when it proposed a moratorium on such deployments. Officials from both the US and NATO argued that this rendered Russia's proposed moratorium meaningless.[71] In addition, the US had no confidence that Russia would comply with a voluntary moratorium, as Russia had violated the INF Treaty to develop the 9M729.

Thus, Russia's promise to refrain from deploying INF-range missiles in Europe, when it had already deployed such a missile, seemed less like an opening for an arms-control dialogue than an attempt to maintain a unilateral advantage in INF-range missiles deployed in Europe. This advantage would exist not only during negotiations on a moratorium, which were likely to drag on while the two states sought to define verification mechanisms for the agreement, but also after it entered into force if Russia continued to refuse to either eliminate the 9M729 missile or demonstrate that it could not fly to more than 500 km.

Moreover, a moratorium on INF-range missiles would not have prevented Russia or the US from developing and deploying new missiles in Europe, as either could renounce the moratorium to meet its military requirements. With its ballistic- and cruise-missile attacks against targets in Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated that it believes these missiles have military utility in a conflict. The US plans to deploy INF-range missiles in Germany are a response to the new threat environment in Europe. The absence of a moratorium on INF deployments neither created military requirements for these missiles nor caused Russia to use them against Ukraine; rather, the conflict in Ukraine and the military utility of these missiles caused the absence of a moratorium.

Chinese Author's Perspective on Russia's Proposal

Dai Huaicheng, Secretary-General, China Arms Control and Disarmament Association

The INF Treaty reached by the US and the Soviet Union in 1987 is an important arms-control and disarmament treaty concluded during the Cold War. It was of great significance in preventing misunderstandings between the US and the Soviet Union (and subsequently Russia), reducing the risk of war, easing tensions in international relations, advancing the process of nuclear disarmament, and maintaining world peace and security. The conclusion of the INF Treaty also created positive conditions for the US and the Soviet Union (Russia) to negotiate and conclude other agreements, such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).

Regrettably, the US withdrew from the INF Treaty on 2 August 2019 because of alleged Russian violations regarding the development of the 9M729 (RS-SSC-8 *Screwdriver*) ground-launched cruise missile, but with Russia denying that the characteristics of the missile violated the agreement.[72] Less than three weeks after announcing its formal withdrawal from the INF Treaty, the US conducted a test of a ground-launched *Tomahawk* LACM which was previously prohibited by the treaty.[73] The United States' withdrawal from the INF Treaty has raised concerns in some countries about the true intentions behind Washington's decision, with suspicions that the US wanted to leave the agreement so that it could develop new ground-launched missiles and unilaterally seek military superiority.[74] Over the past five years, those concerns have been validated. In June 2024 the US announced its decision to deploy several types of ground-launched missiles in Germany.[75] Moreover, citing military exercises, the US has thus far retained the *Typhon* missile system comprising the ground-launched *Tomahawk* and SM-6 in the Philippines. These developments mark a substantial step forward taken by the US on deployment of intermediate-range missiles since its withdrawal from the INF Treaty in 2019.

Ground-launched missiles with ranges above 500 km are arguably offensive precision-strike weapons that can be used pre-emptively to penetrate deep into

an adversary's territory and attack high-value targets. Some of these weapons can be equipped with both nuclear and conventional warheads, thereby encompassing both strategic and tactical dimensions, making them highly prone to misinterpretation that could potentially lead to inadvertent escalation. Of particular concern is that the US is determined to deploy its new ground-launched capabilities, including the *Typhon* missile system, in the Asia-Pacific region.[76] A permanent deployment will deepen distrust among some of the surrounding countries, heighten the arms race, exacerbate regional tensions, threaten peace and security in the region, and undermine the existing multilateral arms-control processes.[77] Therefore, in order to safeguard regional peace and security, as well as maintain global strategic balance and stability, the international community should call on the US to give up its deployment plan in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, relevant countries in the Asia-Pacific region should also act prudently in the military- and security-related fields, and take concrete actions to uphold regional and international peace and stability.

3. China's Proposed Treaty on Mutual No-first-use: Meaningful and Achievable

Dai Huaicheng, Secretary-General, China Arms Control and Disarmament Association

On 12 July 2024, China submitted the working paper 'No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative' to the second session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In the working paper, China encouraged the five nuclear-weapons states (as recognised by the NPT) to either 'negotiate and conclude a treaty on "mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons" or issue a political statement in this regard', and proposed four components of such a treaty or statement as a basis for deliberation.[78]

In October 1964, immediately after conducting its first nuclear-weapons test, China declared that it would not be the first to use nuclear weapons 'at any time and under any circumstances'.[79] Over the past 60 years, China's understanding of the nature of nuclear weapons has remained unchanged. China's nuclear policy is highly stable, consistent and predictable, and in itself is an important contribution to the cause of international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.[80]

Why Does China Abide by a No-first-use Policy?

Currently, China is the only one of the five nuclear-weapons states that has made a commitment to no-first-use. This is based on China's understanding of the nature of nuclear weapons and nuclear war.[81]

Firstly, China developed nuclear weapons 'to cope with nuclear blackmail, break nuclear monopoly, and prevent nuclear war'.[82] In 1960, Mao Zedong said: 'if we have [atomic bombs], we cannot use them recklessly; reckless use would be a crime.'[83] Mao also pointed out that 'our country may produce a small number of atomic bombs in the future, but we do not have the intention to use them; … we are just using them as a defensive weapon.'[84]

Secondly, China's no-first-use policy is consistent with its 'independent foreign policy of peace' and its 'national defense policy that is defensive in nature'.[85] The Report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party declares that Chinese modernisation is 'the modernization of peaceful development … China will not tread the old path of war, colonization, and plunder taken by some countries.'[86] China has always pursued a defensive nuclear strategy and kept its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required by national security.[87] China has no intention to engage in any form of arms race with other countries.[88] The fundamental purpose of China's nuclear deterrence is to prevent rather than win a nuclear war, which is completely different from the nuclear strategies aiming to win a nuclear war pursued by some countries.

Thirdly, the concept of no-first-use is rooted in China's strategic cultural thinking of 'cautious warfare' and 'righteous warfare'. The opening statement of *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu points out that 'war is a matter of vital importance to the state; a matter of life and death, the road either to survival or to ruin. Hence, it is imperative that it be studied thoroughly.'[89] Lao Tzu emphasises in *Tao Te Ching* that 'weapons are tools of evil omen not to be used by worthy men. When they are compelled to use them, the less often, the better.'[90] China advocates the principle of 'subduing the enemy without fighting', emphasising the importance of justified actions and responding militarily only after being provoked, rather than instigating disputes.[91]

What is the Significance of No-first-use?

No-first-use of nuclear weapons is increasingly becoming an important common understanding and priority in the field of international arms control.[92] United Nations Secretary General António Guterres has publicly called for the no-first-use of any nuclear weapons.[93] The Non-Aligned Movement, Association of

Members of the P5 meet in Beijing to discuss nuclear issues, 31 January 2019

(Photo by Thomas Peter/AFP via Getty Images)

Southeast Asian Nations, African Union, New Agenda Coalition and numerous non-nuclear-weapons states have called on nuclear-weapons states to commit to a no-first-use policy.[94] This has shown that no-first-use has been widely supported in the NPT review process. Early discussion, negotiation and conclusion of a treaty on no-first-use of nuclear weapons among the nuclear-weapons states is an effective and meaningful right step to reduce nuclear risks and promote nuclear disarmament, especially given the current complex and serious international strategic situation.[95] If all five nuclear-weapons states were to commit to not being the first to use nuclear weapons, nuclear war among those states would never break out.

Enhancing Strategic Mutual Trust Between Major Countries

If all five nuclear-weapons states were to adopt a no-first-use policy, the benefits would include a reduced role for nuclear weapons in nuclear-weapons states' national security, Russia and the United States possibly considering ending their launch-on-warning nuclear postures, and a reduced risk of nuclear escalation, confrontation and war. In turn, these benefits would enhance mutual strategic trust among major countries and thus maintain the global strategic balance and stability. Western scholars have also pointed out that in the context of the deteriorating relationship between China and the US, adopting a no-first-use policy for nuclear weapons can play an important role in reducing risks between the two countries.[96]

Promoting Nuclear Disarmament

At the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly devoted to Disarmament, in 1982, China put forward a nuclear-disarmament proposal for the first time, suggesting that as the first step towards nuclear disarmament, 'all nuclear-weapon states should reach an agreement on the no-use of nuclear weapons. Prior to reaching this agreement, each nuclear-weapon state should unconditionally commit to not using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-weapon-free zones, and to not being the first to use nuclear weapons against each other at any time and under any circumstances.'[97] The conclusion of a legally binding treaty among the five nuclear-weapons states on 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons' would reduce the concerns of non-nuclear-weapons states about the risk of nuclear war. Following on from the conclusion of such a treaty, the international community can further activate substantive discussions on the issue of negative security assurances within the framework of the Conference on Disarmament, and promote the creation, as soon as possible, of an international legal instrument which will have greater value and credibility than a unilateral pledge that commits nuclear-weapons states to not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapons states or nuclear-weapons-free-zones, thereby helping create the conditions for complete and thorough nuclear disarmament.[98] Therefore, a treaty on 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons' would be a substantial step towards ultimate nuclear disarmament.

How to Achieve a Treaty on 'Mutual No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons'?

Given the divergent nuclear policies of the five nuclear-weapons states and the current tense geopolitical situation, a legally binding treaty may not be achieved swiftly. But the five nuclear-weapons states should still take a step-by-step approach, so as to meet each other halfway.

Engagement

While engagement between the five nuclear-weapons states may not fully establish mutual trust, doubts about each other's nuclear postures will not dissipate

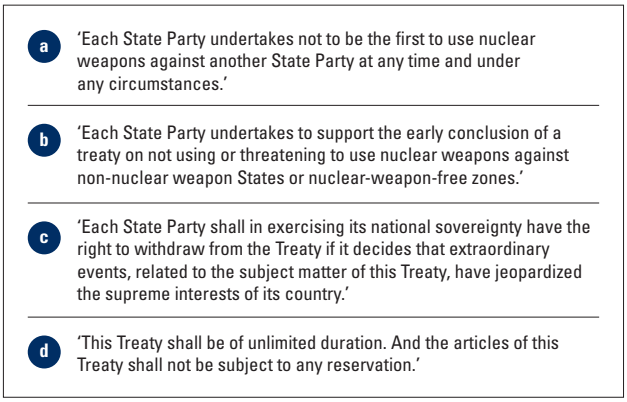
without mutual trust. The five states could start by engaging in meaningful dialogue. Doing so would not require them to commit to significant changes to their existing nuclear policies but can enhance understanding and trust through communication, and create an atmosphere conducive to concluding a treaty. Instead of questioning China's no-first-use policy, some countries should start with talks and address each other's concerns through dialogue and communication.

In August this year, China took over as the coordinator of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) mechanism, which provides an important opportunity and working platform for the P5 to seriously discuss the issue of concluding a treaty on 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons'. Meanwhile, in-depth Track II exchanges, dialogues and discussions among experts from P5 countries should also be encouraged.

Political Statements

In September 1994, China and Russia undertook not to be the first to use nuclear weapons against each other or target their nuclear weapons at each other.[99] In June 1998, China and the US announced they would also not target their nuclear weapons at each other.[100] In January 2022, the leaders of the five nuclear-weapons states issued a joint statement on preventing a nuclear war and avoiding arms races, in which they affirmed that 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought' and reiterated that none of their countries' nuclear weapons were targeted at each other or at any other state.[101] These declarations fully demonstrate that, as long as the five nuclear-weapons states have sufficient political will, discussions or negotiations between them on a 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons' treaty are practical and meaningful. Pending a final, legally binding treaty, a joint political statement is theoretically low-hanging fruit. If the five nuclear-weapons states can reach a consensus ahead of the 2026 NPT Review Conference, it would be a major step forward in the history of international nuclear-arms control and would also create a positive context for the conference. Even if, for certain reasons, the five nuclear-weapons states are unable to issue a joint political statement, the other four nuclear-weapons states can seriously consider issuing unilateral statements, bilateral or multilateral joint statements, or other forms of declaration.

Figure 3.1: **Draft elements of China's 'No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative'**



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China

A Legally Binding Treaty

The working paper 'No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative' recently submitted by China inherits traditions in Chinese nuclear policymaking and makes further innovations. The four key components of a treaty on 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons' or political statement that the working paper proposes cover its purpose, application, withdrawal, duration and other critical points. These components may not be perfect, but they could serve as a good starting point for in-depth discussions among the P5 and during the NPT review process.

The US is undoubtedly the key to successfully negotiating and concluding the treaty. Prior to the US 2020 presidential election, then-candidate Joe Biden said that 'the sole purpose of our nuclear arsenal is to deter – and, if necessary, retaliate for – a nuclear attack against the United States and its allies.'[102] This built on earlier remarks made by then-president Barack Obama in April 2009 that 'the United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons.'[103] While the Biden administration did not ultimately pursue a sole-purpose policy in its 2022 nuclear-posture review, there were discussions within the US government about implementing a no-first-use policy as well at that time. It is to be hoped that the new US government that takes office following the presidential election in November 2024 can take a step in this direction.

US Author's Perspective on China's Proposal

Amy F. Woolf, consultant specialising in nuclear-weapons and arms-control policy

China has proposed that the NPT's five nuclear-weapons states issue a joint political statement or conclude a treaty on the 'mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons'.[104] The proposal suggests that each of these states should undertake 'not to be the first to use nuclear weapons against another State Party at any time and under any circumstances'. It also contends that this would bolster stability, reduce nuclear risks, and 'reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security doctrines'.

The US government has not issued a formal response to this initiative, but US officials have questioned how China's adherence to a no-first-use policy, whether codified in a unilateral statement or a multilateral agreement, would be consistent with the ongoing expansion of its nuclear arsenal and its apparent development of a 'launch on warning' posture for its forces.[105] Moreover, China's proposal does not suggest that the five nuclear-weapons states should change their nuclear forces, plans and procedures so that they would be unable to launch their nuclear weapons first. The proposal, regardless of whether it is captured in a joint political statement or negotiated as a formal treaty, seems to call for nothing more than a simple statement of intent by each of the five states.

A simple no-first-use pledge would do little to reduce the role of nuclear weapons or the risk of their use in a conflict. Some claim that if each state pledges to use nuclear weapons only in retaliation for a nuclear attack, and all states pledge not to use nuclear weapons first, then the risk of nuclear use due to misunderstandings during a conflict would decrease.[106] However, this view lacks credibility if each state maintains forces that it can launch promptly and retains the plans and procedures guiding how to do so. Each state could reverse its pledge at any time, and would probably maintain the ability to do so, thus creating pressure and instability during crises.

The mutual adoption of a no-first-use pledge, either through a joint political statement or a formal treaty, might also increase the risk of conventional conflict and erode stability because the threat of nuclear use can induce caution in crises below the nuclear threshold. A statement which removed that threat might also increase the intensity of a regional conventional conflict, and therefore create the very risks of escalation to nuclear use that the no-first-use pledge was designed to reduce.

Even if a no-first-use pledge were codified in a treaty, the statement would not reduce the risk of nuclear war unless the treaty also required changes in the parties' force postures and plans. Moreover, a verification regime would have to do more than just confirm the *absence* of any nuclear explosions. The US maintains – in its laws, policies and arms-control practice – that a verification regime must allow the parties to 'detect such violations in time to respond effectively and thereby deny the other side the [military] benefit of the violation'.[107] Therefore, the verification procedures would have to allow each state to confirm that the others had completed the required changes and to detect evidence of any intent to reverse those changes. A no-first-use treaty certainly would not meet this standard if the first indication of a militarily significant violation came when one state attacked another with nuclear weapons.

Neither China nor the other nuclear-weapons states are likely to offer enough transparency into their nuclear plans and launch procedures to meet this standard. Currently, China does not offer any transparency into its nuclear force posture and has rejected suggestions that it should do so. Therefore, it would probably reject treaty provisions that required it to alter its force posture and to allow other parties to confirm that it had not reversed the required changes. But it would probably not be alone. As long as they continue to centre nuclear weapons in their national-security strategies, each of the nuclear-weapons states would probably hesitate to alter their force postures in ways that deny them the ability to launch promptly.

However, nuclear-weapons states could still raise their concerns about nuclear risks in a dialogue about nuclear forces and doctrine, which might then lead to a broader discussion about the security challenges that require them to rely on nuclear weapons in their national security strategies. If an understanding of these concerns and a resolution of these challenges allowed them to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies, they might then be able to discuss the adoption of a no-first-use pledge.

Russian Author's Perspective on China's Proposal

Dr Nikolai Sokov, Senior Fellow at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

In 1993, Russia repudiated the no-first-use (NFU) policy devised by the Soviet Union in 1982.[108] Moscow's decision was intended to offset its diminished conventional forces following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its resultant weakness. Consequently, it saw the prospect of using nuclear weapons as a means to better deter the superior conventional power of the US and NATO. In 2000, Russia's new Military Doctrine allowed for limited nuclear use if an adversary sought to use conventional superiority in a limited ('regional', by Russian classification) conflict.[109] Subsequent iterations of Russia's nuclear doctrine have restated this position. Consequently, China's 2024 NFU proposal runs counter to well-established Russian policy, which Moscow is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, especially the provision that NFU should apply 'at any time and under any circumstances'.[110]

Russia's position is politically complicated, however, as it will not want to openly reject China's initiative, given the strategic partnership between the two countries. China's support is critical for Russia's confrontation with the US and its allies, and for circumventing sanctions they have levied against Russia. Consequently, Moscow will need to formulate its repudiation in terms not offensive to Beijing. Russia will likely try to shift the blame to the US, the UK and also to France, which have also consistently rejected NFU proposals and will likely do the same again, despite ostensible US willingness to engage on this subject.[111] Other states possessing nuclear weapons may also take a negative stance on China's initiative – particularly North Korea, but perhaps also Pakistan.

It is likely that Moscow will also explain privately to Beijing why it cannot accept the NFU policy at this time, while keeping open the prospect of acceptance at some point in the future. This will remain its position for at least as long as the war against Ukraine continues and there is a distinct possibility of direct conflict with the West.

Publicly, however, Russia has praised the Chinese proposals. Ryabkov said in August that they contained 'grains of reason' and had been extensively discussed between the two countries, but that any further steps depended on the Western response.[112] Afterwards, Moscow will be able to express regret that there is no possible way forward and set aside fears that Beijing's proposal could threaten its nuclear policy.

Things could become complicated for Moscow if Washington decides to support the NFU initiative, at least tentatively, as was suggested by Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart in May 2024.[113] The superior conventional military power of the US and its allies makes such a move theoretically possible, especially considering the lengthy amount of time it would take to enact a new policy. This would potentially put Russia in a more difficult position and complicate its relationship with China.

Conclusion

Personalities, self-interest and serendipity have played a part in many previous nuclear-arms agreements, but all now are missing from the strategic landscape. As the authors in this research report make clear, the United States, Russia and China are talking past one another, if they are talking at all. Each country's apparent position on pursuing new arms-control agreements is untenable or unacceptable in the eyes of one or both of the other two. Progress, for now, is moribund.

As the clock runs down on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), any kind of binding follow-on between Moscow and Washington is almost certainly beyond reach. The lack of any restrictions on the size of Russia's and the United States' strategic forces will raise questions about what other possibilities are available in the absence of a treaty. A less ambitious but more feasible approach may be for Russia and the US to explore bilateral or unilateral pledges: to remain within New START's central limitations on launchers and warheads or to resume sharing data on their nuclear forces. Moscow and Washington could also potentially shift their dialogue to discussions around risk-reduction and confidence-building measures. While in principle the prospect of replacing or continuing some elements of New START has support in Beijing and possibly partial support in Moscow, implementing even these fairly straightforward ideas will face significant challenges given Russia and the United States' adversarial relationship and their diminished political will.

Similarly, Russian overtures for a moratorium on the deployment of Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF)-class weapons in Europe, albeit mostly insincere, have been dismissed by the US. Russia's development of the Novator 9M729 (RS-SSC-8 *Screwdriver*) ground-launched LACM, beginning around 2008, was cited by the US and its allies as the reason for Washington's eventual withdrawal from the INF Treaty. Despite Russian denials, the US maintained that the missile had a range that constituted a material breach of the treaty. Moscow's duplicity over its intentions in Ukraine and its subsequent full-blown invasion in February 2022 served only to diminish further the already-remote chances of US engagement. Instead, Washington and Berlin have agreed to the episodic deployment of US conventionally armed INF-class weapons in Germany from 2026. Russia will almost certainly respond in kind with the development of new ground-launched systems while China will almost certainly continue to criticise US ground-launched-missile deployments.

China continues to advocate for Russia and the US to find a route beyond New START, while lamenting the collapse of the INF and absenting itself from any arms-control negotiations. Its idea of negotiating a treaty or issuing a political statement on the mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons by the P5 nuclear-weapons states has been endorsed by neither Russia nor the US, albeit for different reasons. For Washington, China's proposal lacks credibility because of the absence of verification mechanisms and because it does nothing to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the P5 countries' national-security strategies or increase transparency of their force postures. The US also questions whether China's growing nuclear force is consistent with its unilateral pledge. Moscow has not publicly repudiated China's proposal, but probably sees it as a non-starter due to it clashing with Russia's own nuclear policy. Although Russian officials have publicly praised China's proposal, Moscow will probably attempt to explain privately to Beijing why it cannot support such an agreement at this time, and to do so in a way that avoids giving offence, bearing in mind its increasing reliance on China in its confrontation with the West. Instead, Moscow will probably seek to shift the blame onto the US while keeping open the prospect that it could join such an agreement at a later time.

The three authors in this report outline the current landscape for arms control as seen by the US, Russia and China, the contours of which are far from encouraging. Each of them, however, has made their contribution in a spirit of constructive dialogue that perhaps, in the fullness of time, their respective countries may once again also embrace.

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